

INTERIOR BY
THOMAS NAGAI

Courtesy of A.
C. A. Gallery

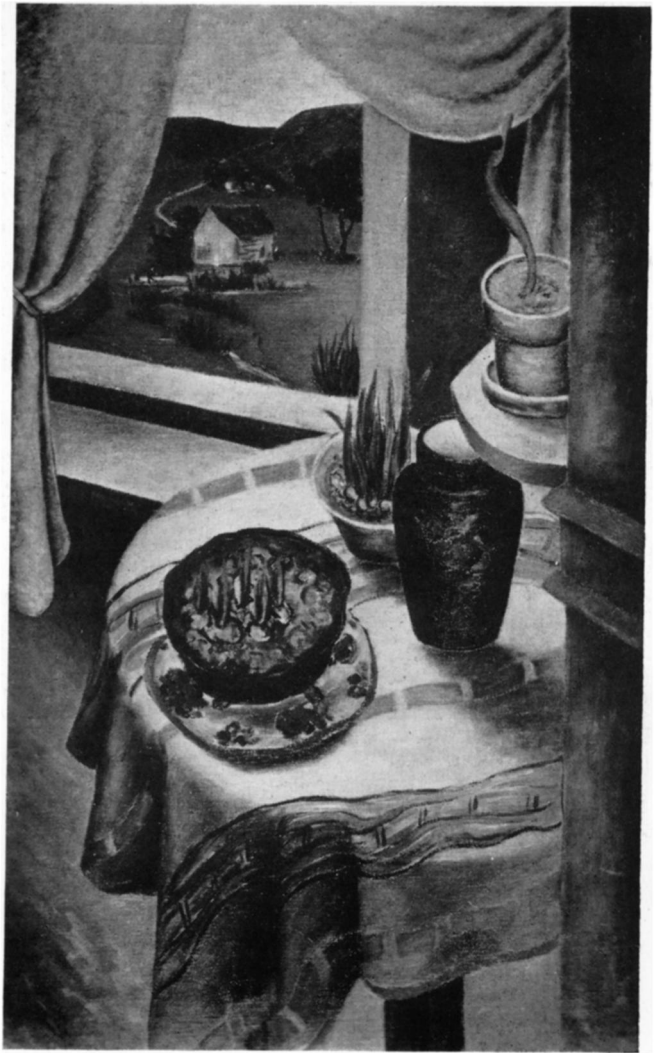
JAPANESE PAINTERS IN AMERICA BY RUTH L. BENJAMIN

MUCH has been written about the revelation of Japanese art to nineteenth century Western painters: Whistler, Degas, Manet, Monet and Mary Cassatt. But what of the Japanese artist of today who comes to America, lives among us, modifies our art, and is himself influenced by Western tradition? What is happening to him?

Let us ignore the men who are so completely Americanized as to seem only weak imitators of our Academic school. The Japanese, of course, have always been adept at assimilating other nations' ideas. Their painting of the greatest periods was Chinese in technique, Indian in religious inspiration. In the seventeenth century, however, the advent of the block-print introduced a popular art expressive of contemporary life, an art that was truly Japanese.

Since 1868 the painters have been open to European influences, learning to use oils instead of the Chinese ink and the water-colors that had been their only pigments for over a thousand years. Lately, many of them have gone to Paris to study, giving up the conventional forms and flat designs of their ancestors in exchange for scientific anatomy, chiaroscuro and perspective. And there are those who live in the United States.

Of these, the best known is undoubtedly Kuniyoshi. His soft grays and mahogany browns have become familiar sights in most of the exhibitions of American artists. Yasuo Kuniyoshi was born in 1893 and came to America when thirteen or fourteen years old. His is a personal talent. At his first exhibition at the Daniel Gallery, New York, in 1922, the critics noticed that. Here, they said, was something that had not appeared before in Japanese art nor in American, a distinctly individual quality, marked not only by original color harmonies, but by wit, ingenuity and fantasy. Then, in 1925 and again in 1928, Kuniyoshi went to France, England and Spain. He learned to make his figures more solid. He also brought back from these trips new subject matter and a new, rather pitiless mood. He turned for a while from pictures of children, domestic animals and flowers to pictures of bull fights, acrobats and prostitutes. Included in the Museum of Modern Art's show of Nineteen American Painters, his work made Ralph Flint exclaim in "Art and Understanding" for March, 1930: "One of the most individual and gifted of the younger men, he would undoubtedly occupy a more dominant place in American painting were he not so persistently precocious in subject matter." During the last five years, however, this has not always been true. *Flowers*, in the Eleventh Annual of the Salons of America in May, 1933, was a beautiful still life of flowers and leaves arranged in a vase on the corner of a table. At about the same time Kuniyoshi exhibited a delightful *Two Babies* in the Baby Show at the Reinhardt Galleries. He was represented at the Chicago Century of Progress Ex-



hibition of 1934 by *Boy Taking Cow Home* and by a very large canvas called *Circus Girl*. Another circus subject figured in New York's First Municipal Art Exhibit. Last February, at the American Contemporary Art Gallery, in a group exhibition of twenty-seven Japanese artists living in New York, Kuniyoshi had a picture called *Fruits on Table*, in his usual mahogany browns, and a figure of a woman called *Resting*. His paintings are in the permanent collections of the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts; the Gallery of Living Art, New York; and in the Whitney Museum of American Art. A particularly fine example of his work is the whimsical *Landscape* belonging to the latter, with its beautiful, Oriental arrangement of leaves against a typical American country scene. In his charming murals for one of the Women's Powder Rooms in Rockefeller Center Music Hall, we find that restful sense of the value of empty spaces that is so characteristic of Japanese art. Kuniyoshi has a strong sense of humor that is sometimes gentle, sometimes bitter. This pervades his lithographs. Both lithographs and drawings are as carefully and completely worked out as the pictures in oil.

While not so well known as Kuniyoshi, Fuji Nakamizo is an equally fascinating fusion of East and West. His one-man show at the Montross Gallery in September, 1934, was a thrilling experience. It showed unusual versatility. In *Canada Geese* and in *Wild Horses* we saw Nakamizo's distinctly Oriental feeling for animals. As Alan Priest, of the Metropolitan Museum, tells us, the Japanese paint



PAINTINGS FROM TWO OF THE FORTY-FIVE COLLEGE ART ASSOCIATION TRAVELING EXHIBITIONS WHICH OPEN IN OCTOBER.

Above: AFTER LUNCH by MAURICE STERNE (Corcoran Gallery of Art) from an exhibition of the work of twenty-four men illustrating Volume I of the INDEX OF TWENTIETH CENTURY ARTISTS, opening October 7 at the Grand Central Galleries.

Below: PLATE OF FRUIT by GEORGES BRAQUE from TWELVE PAINTINGS BY SIX FRENCH ARTISTS from the collection of M. Paul Rosenberg now on view at the Durand-Ruel Galleries.



TWELVE



BOATING

KANAME
MIYAMOTO

Courtesy Midtown
Galleries

animals with innate understanding, "as forms of life, complete and beautiful in themselves." That this is so is even more evident in Nakamizo's stunning water colors of black horses, spirited, joyous, full of vigor and dramatic rhythm. But all the water colors are beautiful. They are painted in thin wash on absorbent paper, sometimes heavy, at other times quite transparent. They are full of surprises. For instance, there is a grave-eyed, modern little girl, with a white bow in her hair. She is looking straight out of the picture and hence cannot see the Last Supper that is taking place behind her. Yet she seems aware of it. And again, there is a nude woman, placed most unexpectedly against a background of New York

City buildings. Another nude, with abundant long hair in a knot at the back of her head, lies leaning on a cushion of a most enchanting pale green. The paper above her is tinted violet. Although Japanese by birth, Fuji Nakamizo has lived in the United States so long that he does not remember his native land. He has studied art with Frank Du Mond and Joseph Pennell. Many of his oil paintings are completely American in theme and handling; the city skyline, crowded streets, the Beekman waterfront, Riverside Drive. *The Statue of Liberty* is fine in color and pattern. In the group show at the A. C. A. Gallery, *Skippping Rope* reminded us of an old *kakemono* and seemed more Japanese than anything



TOWACA, N. J.

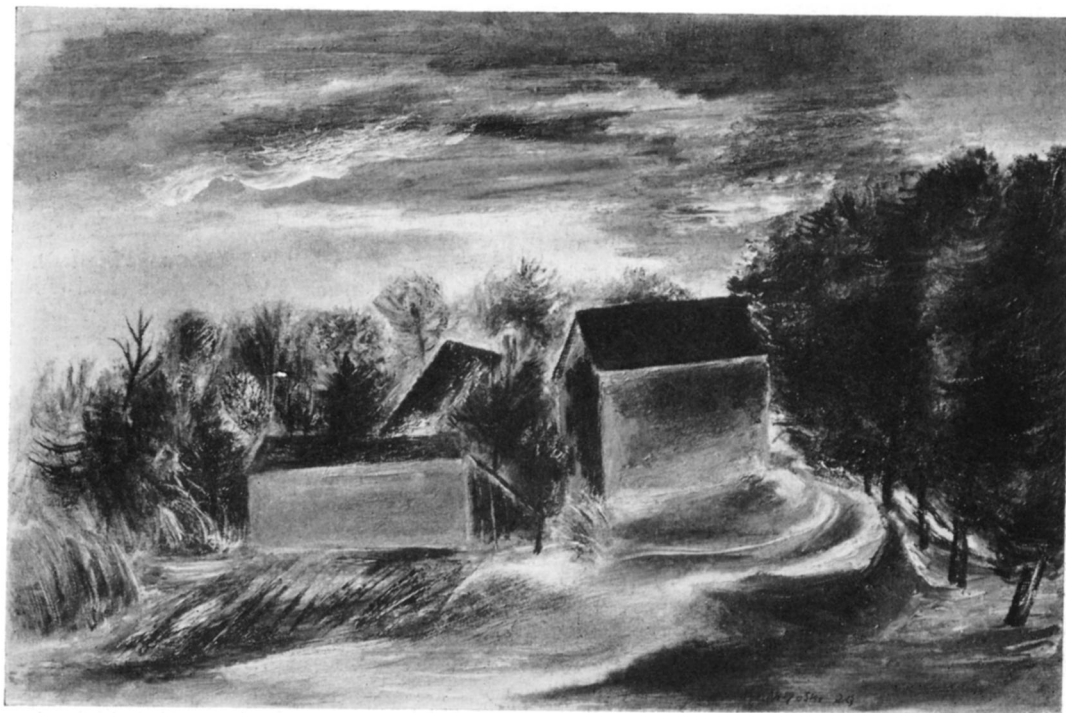
CHUZO
TAMOTZU

Courtesy An
American Group

LANDSCAPE

YASUO
KUNIYOSHI

Courtesy Down-
town Gallery



else in the room. *Boy Calling* was original in design. Most appealing of all was the charming, serious *Little Girl*, with her white dog standing on his hind legs, licking her hand. Nakamizo has a restless vigor and a powerful decorative feeling. Whether he is gay or dramatic, he is always original.

Bumpei Usui is a painter who understands the precious quality of the expressive line of his ancestors. In the *Landscape* that he had at the A. C. A. Gallery, the firm lines of fence and buildings contrasted with the soft, indefinite contours of trees and grass. Excellent, too, was the way the fence climbed the hill, with all the reinforcing lines flowing upward until they reached the high horizon, where the level lines of roofs and tree top contributed to a peaceful feeling. Usui showed a skillful study of a girl at the Society of Independent Artists in 1930. He is an able colorist and has a charming feeling for textures. Soichi Sunami, who is well known as a photographer, is also a painter. His *Haystack* in the group show of Japanese artists was an imaginative picture with a fine, stormy sky. Other painters who do good work in landscape are Chuzo Tamotsu and Kikuta Nakagawa. The former belongs to the organization known as An American Group and, although born in Japan, is completely westernized. In 1929, he was the star of the show at the little Opportunity Gallery in New York and, at that time, his *Down Hill* was reproduced in "The Arts." He is a subtle, individual colorist. His *Apple Blossoms* and *Peace Valley* were among the outstanding landscapes in the show of Japanese artists resident in New York. He is also a good animal painter. Nakagawa paints portraits and still life, but seems to be at his best in landscape work. He is one of the Washington Square artists who recently exhibited at the Roerich Museum in New York.

Kaname Miyamoto was born in Japan and spent his youth in Hawaii. Since coming to America, he has not lost his Oriental sense of line and delicacy of color. But he uses a more sketchy technique than those of his compatriots who have not come under western influence and he has adopted our feeling for form. Miyamoto paints

in various media. His oils are excellent. At the Roerich Museum show he had a small landscape and a particularly fine still life with beautiful grays. His water colors are as good or better than his oils. In them the range of subjects is extensive: cafes, boats, five and ten cent stores, nudes, traffic jams, boot-blacks and speakeasies. We think of the gay Japanese prints of the eighteenth century. *Boating* suggests both Marie Laurencin and Masanobu. Miyamoto is a member of the Midtown Coöperative Group.

Isami Doi exhibits with an American Group. He was also included in last year's show of Japanese artists, but he works entirely in the modernistic Parisian manner and, as a matter of fact, was born in Hawaii. Five years ago he had two Hawaiian landscapes at the Museum of Modern Art. More Japanese is the work of Roy Kadowaki, whose *Fantan Game* at the A. C. A. Gallery aroused lively interest. The subject was Japanese, the technique a mixture of East and West, the strong concentration of light in the center being something quite foreign to Eastern tradition. On the opposite wall hung Thomas Nagai's well-composed interior. Nagai's most successful work is in *gouache*. A fine, dark harbor scene in this medium was much admired at the Roerich Museum this March. Nagai's one-man show at the little La Salle Gallery in January showed great promise.

Perhaps we can now attempt to answer our original question: what is happening to the Japanese artists who live among us? They have become more realistic. Some of them have learned to use oil paints as freely as any American whose ancestors came from Europe. But a number of them are more adept at water color painting. Although there is a tendency toward much greater looseness of line, most of them remain consummate craftsmen. They have not lost that piquant quality of the unexpected that one finds in ancient Japanese art. Rhythmic design is still outstanding in their work, but there is a modern emphasis on structural solidity. Color, on the whole, is subdued in key. Into the bustling turmoil of American life this proud and sensitive race brings good taste, serenity and a feeling for beauty in the humblest objects on earth.